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ABSTRACT

High school students who had been pretested on the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) measure of empathy were shown a brief videotaped presentation designed to elicit empathic arousal for a particular group of children (mentally retarded or crippled). Each individual was subsequently given an opportunity to act charitably for a recipient group which was identified as either (1) the same group of children who had been previously described in the presentation or (2) a different group. Individuals in the control group were shown a presentation of an affectively-neutral topic prior to the opportunity to help. Highly empathic adolescents were found to be more charitable than their relatively less empathic counterparts. Moreover, the findings indicated that empathy for a particular target, once aroused, may "transfer" and subsequently enhance charitable behaviors towards recipients who did not serve as the original source of the individual's concern. (Author)

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Charitable Behavior: An Examination of the Transfer of Empathy

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Abstract

High school students who had been pretested on the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) measure of empathy were shown a brief videotaped presentation designed to elicit empathic arousal for a particular group of children (mentally retarded or crippled). Each individual was subsequently given an opportunity to act charitably for a recipient group which was identified as either (1) the same group of children who had been previously described in the presentation or (2) a different group. Individuals in the control group were shown a presentation of an affectively-neutral topic prior to the opportunity to help.

Highly empathic adolescents were found to be more charitable than their relatively less empathic counterparts. Moreover, the findings indicated that empathy for a particular target, once aroused, may "transfer" and subsequently enhance charitable behaviors enacted for recipients who did not serve as the original source of the individual's concern.

Charitable Behavior: An Examination of the Transfer of Empathy

There is a growing body of literature involving children and adults which indicates that empathizing, or vicariously experiencing the distress of another individual, enhances the expression of helping behaviors directed toward that individual (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Hoffman, 1976; Krebs, 1975). In a recent investigation (Barnett, King, & Howard, 1979), children who had discussed sad experiences encountered by another playmate or sibling were found to be more charitable to a group of needy others than children who had been saddened by discussing personal misfortunes. In addition to affirming the empathy-altruism relationship, this finding raised the possibility that the arousal of empathy may promote a generalized inclination to aid others, including potential recipients who may not have served as the original source of the individual's concern. Although there is some evidence (Hoffman, 1975; Latané and Darley, 1970; Murphy, 1937) that "empathic distress" for an individual, once aroused, will continue at a high level of intensity if a helpful act for that individual is not or cannot be performed, the extent to which this concern will "transfer" and heighten helping of a different needy target has not yet been established.[1]

In the present study, high school students were individually shown a brief videotaped presentation designed to elicit empathic arousal for a particular group of "disabled children" (mentally retarded or crippled). Each student was subsequently given an opportunity to act

charitably for a recipient group which was identified as either (1) the same group of children who had been described in the presentation or (2) a different group. Students in the control group were shown a presentation of an affectively-neutral topic prior to the opportunity to help. It was predicted that the individuals who had watched the empathy-arousing presentation about a particular needy group would behave more charitably toward those children than would the individuals who had watched the control presentation. Moreover, it was anticipated that empathy for a specific target, once aroused, would transfer to another needy recipient group such that the individuals in the "different" experimental condition would also display more charitable behavior than individuals in the control group. Although the relative charitability of individuals in the "same" and "different" groups was also of interest since this comparison might reflect the extent of empathic transfer, no specific prediction was made.

Also explored in the present study was the extent to which an individual's tendency to respond empathically to the plight of others (as assessed by the Mehrabian and Epstein [1972] scale) influences helping under conditions differing in empathy arousal cues. Prior studies which have focused on the dispositional empathy-helping relationship (e.g., Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) suggest that highly empathic individuals respond more charitably to needy others than their relatively less empathic counterparts. However, in one investigation (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), highly empathic individuals were found to behave more prosocially toward a confederate (i.e., deliver less electric shock) than less empathic individuals

only under conditions wherein pain cues were salient. Based upon this finding, it was predicted that although highly empathic individuals in the present study would generally respond more charitably than relatively less empathic individuals, this difference would be more marked in the empathy-arousing conditions than in the condition devoid of affective cues.

Method

Subjects and Experimenters

A total of 103 10th to 12th grade students, 33 males and 70 females, took part in the study. The subjects were drawn from four introductory psychology classes at a public high school in a small midwestern town and had parental permission to participate. The experimenter for the first (group) session was a female student in psychology. The experimenter and assistant for the second (individual) sessions were a male and a (different) female student in psychology, respectively.

Materials and Procedure

The first session was conducted in the students' regular classroom. They were informed that the purpose of the session was to gather data on "a new questionnaire and an intellectual-perceptual task we are designing." At this time, the students completed the Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) empathy scale and a filler task (a modified embedded figures test). Based upon the distribution of empathy scores for each sex, median splits determined the High (n = 51) and Low (n = 52) empathy groups.[2] Within the High and Low groups, the subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions described below.

In the second session, the subjects were brought individually to a small, narrow room located in the high school. One end of the room contained a video tape recorder and a monitor; on a long table running the length of the room was a small stack of "Winnie-the Pooh Color and Activity" booklets, six stacks of loose "color and activity" pages (20 pages per stack), a stapler, and several pamphlets. Each subject was informed that the purpose of the study was to assess students' opinions of a series of "TV news briefs" for a proposed news program designed specifically for high school students. To accomplish this, each student would be observing two of the videotaped presentations and would be completing a short "reaction questionnaire" after each presentation.

The experimenter then explained that he was training a new assistant who would be administering the questionnaire following the second presentation. Each subject was told that there would probably be a short delay prior to the assistant's arrival. Directing the subject's attention to the table, the experimenter continued

> Some of the news briefs focus on various groups of institutionalized disabled children throughout the state of Kansas. While gathering information at one institution, we noticed that the children liked to color pictures and work on simple puzzles. My staff and I have designed a six-page "Activity Booklet" for the children at this institution. After watching the second presentation, you may put together and staple some of the booklets and place them on the stack already completed by other students, if you wish. In addi-

tion, there are information pamphlets on the table relevant to some of the other presentations. You may prefer to browse through them while waiting for my assistant to arrive. Do whatever you wish.

Following these instructions, all of the subjects viewed the first 90-second videotaped presentation (on the "energy crisis") and answered the brief "reaction questionnaire." For their second "news brief," the subjects watched one of three 90-second videotapes: (1) a report on institutionalized crippled children, (2) a report on institutionalized mentally retarded children, or (3) a presentation designed to be affectively neutral (on "computerized instruction"). The scripts for the "crippled" and "mentally retarded" children presentations were identical, except for references to the specific characteristics and deficiencies associated with each disability. Moreover, both presentations included segments designed to elicit empathic arousal (e.g., "Mentally retarded [crippled] children are frequently ignored or ridiculed by other children, leaving them feeling hurt and lonely").[3]

At the conclusion of the second presentation, the experimenter reminded the subject that (1) he would soon be leaving and that he would be sending in his assistant to administer the questionnaire and (2) while waiting for her to arrive, he/she could "make some activity booklets, browse through the pamphlets, or simply sit and wait." At this point, the experimenter indicated that the disabled children he had described at the outset of the session (i.e., the recipients of the "Activity Booklets") were mentally retarded (or crippled) children from

an institution in western Kansas. In the Same condition, the subject was informed that the recipients were the same group of children who had been described in the second presentation (e.g., "crippled children" presentation/"crippled children" recipient). In the Different condition, the experimenter indicated that the recipients were a different group of children (e.g., "mentally retarded children" presentation/ "crippled children" recipient). In the Control condition, the experimenter simply identified the potential recipients as mentally retarded or crippled children.[4]

Prior to departing, the experimenter encouraged the subject to "think about the presentation you just watched because my assistant will be arriving in a couple of minutes to ask you some questions about it." After leaving the subject alone for two minutes, the assistant entered and administered (1) a brief affect measure (described in footnote 3) which instructed the subject to describe how he/she had felt "after watching the second videotape" and (2) the "news brief reaction questionnaire." Finally, the subject was thanked and returned to the classroom.[5]

Results

A 2(High/Low Empathy) x 3(Condition) x 2(Sex of Subject) analysis of variance was performed on both the affect rating scores and the number of booklets completed. Post hoc analyses of significant effects were conducted with the Newman-Keuls test. The pattern of results for both dependent variables were quite similar and are presented in Table 1. Although the means for Sex of Subject are presented,

no main or interaction effects involving this variable were found on either dependent measure.

Insert Table 1 about here

Affect ratings. A main effect of Condition was found on the affect measure, $F(2,91) = 24.28$, $p < .001$. The affect ratings of subjects in the Control condition ($M = 29.91$), who watched a presentation on "computerized instruction," were significantly higher (reflecting less sadness) than subjects in the Same ($M = 22.45$) or Different ($M = 24.58$) conditions. The affect ratings of the latter two groups did not differ significantly from one another. Subjects in the High Empathy group reported being significantly sadder ($M = 24.76$) than subjects in the Low Empathy group ($M = 26.54$), $F(1,91) = 4.19$, $p < .05$. The interaction of Condition and Empathy Level failed to reach statistical significance, $F(2,91) = 1.08$.

Number of booklets completed. A main effect of Condition was found, $F(2,91) = 3.46$, $p < .05$. Subjects in the Control condition made significantly fewer "Activity Booklets" for the children ($M = 2.68$) than did subjects in the Same ($M = 4.45$) or Different ($M = 4.00$) conditions, who did not differ significantly from one another. High Empathy subjects completed significantly more booklets ($M = 4.29$) than did Low Empathy subjects ($M = 3.13$), $F(1,91) = 4.12$, $p < .05$. The interaction of Condition and Empathy Level again failed to approach statistical significance, $F(2,91) = 1.19$.

Discussion

The results of the present study are congruent with those of other investigations (Barnett, King, & Howard, 1979; Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Krebs, 1975) indicating that the arousal of empathy is associated with heightened prosocial behavior. Moreover, the present findings extend our understanding of the empathy-altruism relationship by demonstrating that empathy for a particular target, once aroused, may transfer and subsequently enhance charitable behaviors enacted for individuals who did not serve as the initial source of concern.

As predicted, highly empathic adolescents were found to be more charitable than their relatively less empathic peers. Contrary to prediction, however, the difference in the number of booklets completed by high and low empathic individuals was not found to be significantly greater following the empathy-arousing presentations than following the affectively-neutral presentation. The results of a prior investigation (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972) suggest that the expected pattern might have been obtained had the empathic cues of the needy others been made even more compelling and salient than that achieved through the use of brief videotaped presentations.

The "transfer of empathy" effect demonstrated in this investigation will, undoubtedly, require further study and clarification. For example, a limitation of the present design was that the two recipient groups may have been perceived as sharing a common "class" membership (e.g., disabled children) and certain empathy-relevant characteristics, such as the extent of neediness and deservedness of fate. Nonetheless,

the individuals in the Different condition, whose charitability approximated that of the individuals in the Same condition, were aware that they were being asked to help a group of needy children distinct from those depicted in the "news brief". Future investigations should attempt to determine whether, and to what extent, there is a reduction in charitable behaviors enacted for potential recipients who are perceived as increasingly discrepant from the original source of one's empathic arousal.

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Footnotes

[1]It is interesting to note that the inducement of guilt (by making an individual believe that he or she has harmed another) has been found to enhance the individual's subsequent helping, not only of the "victim", but of a needy "third party" in the immediate situation (Freedman, 1970; Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967; Regan, 1971).

[2]Consistent with a prior finding involving high school aged subjects (Eisenberg-Berg & Mussen, 1978), the females' empathy scores (M = 43.50) were found to be significantly higher than the males' (M = 18.42), t (101) = 6.38, $p < .001$; therefore, the median split for females (43/44) was higher than that for males (18/19).

[3]Prior to the start of the study, 47 undergraduates were shown one of the three critical videotapes and were asked to complete a "reaction questionnaire" similar to that used in the present study. The first portion of the questionnaire contained a six-item seven-point bipolar affect rating scale (range: 6 [very sad] to 42 [very happy]) adapted from a prior investigation (Veitch & Griffitt, 1976). The individuals who had watched the "crippled" and "mentally retarded" children presentations reported experiencing a similar mood (Ms = 22.53 and 20.79, respectively); however, they were found to be significantly sadder than individuals who had watched the "neutral" film (M = 27.56) $F(2,44)$ = 4.82, $p < .05$ (post hoc comparisons conducted with the Newman-Keuls test).

[4]Although pretesting had suggested that the "crippled" and "mentally retarded" children presentations would have a similar effect on

mood (see footnote 3), it still appeared possible that subjects might behave more charitably toward one or the other recipient groups. For this reason, the order of presentation was counterbalanced in the Different condition (i.e., "mentally retarded children" presentation/ "crippled children" recipient or vice versa) and the specific target was alternated in the Same and Control conditions. Fortunately, preliminary analyses revealed no main or interaction "recipient" effects on either the affect or helping measure.

[5]In order to avoid "information leaks" during the course of the experiment, full debriefing was conducted in the regular classroom after the completion of the study. When probed, none of the students expressed any awareness that the "real" purpose of the study was to investigate charitable behavior or that the first and second sessions were parts of the same investigation.

Table 1

Mean Affect Ratings and Number of Booklets Completed

	Affect ratings			Number of booklets		
	Condition			Condition		
Empathy level/Sex of subject	Same	Different	Control	Same	Different	Control
High/Males	23.60	23.33	30.60	4.60(5)	4.50(6)	3.60(5)
High/Females	19.36	23.75	29.50	5.91(11)	4.92(12)	2.25(12)
Low/Males	24.00	23.00	30.50	4.20(5)	4.00(6)	3.00(6)
Low/Females	24.17	26.83	29.73	3.17(12)	2.83(12)	2.55(11)

Note. Lower affect scores are associated with greater sadness.

Number in parentheses indicates n.